Expo 2015: Showcasing Ideas, not Icons

Judith Harris (April 24, 2015)

Expo 2015 is an innovative showcase. Unlike World Fairs of the past, its focus is more ideas than icons. Past universal expositions left majestic architectural monuments: London's Crystal Palace from 1851, Paris's Eiffel Tower from 1889, and Rome's EUR district, still magnificent even though war canceled that Expo in 1942.

 This Expo also has important architecture, not least architect Marco Balich [2]'s 121-ft. tall Albero della Vita [3] (Tree of Life), which, he hopes, "will leave everyone open mouthed." Balich is artistic director of the Italian Pavilion, heart of the Milan Expo lasting from May 1 through Oct. 31. Construction of the Tree of Life was by Orgoglio Brescia [4], a consortium of 19 companies, which, together with Pirelli [5] and Coldiretti [6], financed its building.

Among the world-class architects who helped elaborate the site concept were the Italian urban planner Stefano Boeri [7]; Richard Burdett, who teaches urban studies at the London School of Economics; Mark Rylander [8], expert on green environmental studies at the University of Virginia; and Swiss architect Jacques Herzog [9].

The difference between today's Expo and those of the past is that, "Initially, World Fairs brought together to a single place the peoples from all over the globe who otherwise had no contact," said Piero Galli [10], General Manager of the Expo Operations Division.

"But now, with travel all over the globe easier, the theme is what matters, and the debate. And what we want to leave when Expo 2015 ends are ideas."

Galli, whose other official Expo title is General Manager for Events, is one of Italy's busiest men these days, and notoriously hard to track by telephone or even tweet.

But, racing through Rome, he found time to meet with foreign journalists in late April, and to discuss with us his ideas about Expo, from the difficulties of finding space for it in North Milan to its pavilions, transport system, work force and legacy.

The Expo 2015 theme of "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life" is quintessential, and among the topics falling into this category are what the world eats; science and conscience; the right to eat well; and the art of food. Future food security is foremost: "Today's world population of 7 billion is growing, and in just 30 years a way we will have to be found to feed 9 billion," said Galli.

Food waste must be reduced, and farm land used as wisely as possible. "Our world is now home to 10 billion animals, but at this rate in three decades we are going to need 15 billion animals."

For Italy, these questions are all close to heart. "Food is in our chromosomes," said Galli with a smile. "Our agricultural production is more diverse than almost anywhere else. We grow no less than 4,500 vegetables, thanks to our great diversity of climate and soil. It was our duty to stimulate a debate on this."

Echoing his words is Milanese architect-designer Michele De Lucchi [11]. "For me, the Expo as a beautiful film," says De Lucchi. "It brings together 145 nations, all trying to express an idea – and an inspiration – about what is most important for mankind. On a stage without borders we are reasoning and trying to make decisions about how to nourish the planet."

Shortly before Expo ends, the Italian organizers will hand Ban Ki-Moon [12], Secretary-General of the United Nations, a document synthesizing the conclusions of what amounts to this planetary debate.

Until the opening, pragmatic issues tended to take center-stage. "To find so much space in a big city like Milan was tough," said Galli. "But we've been able to 110 acres, or the equivalent of 100 soccer fields." This is small by comparison with the World Fair held at Shanghai in 2010, at the peak of the Chinese economic boom. The largest Expo site in the 164-year history of World Fairs, it covered 5.2 square km., or four times the size of Milan's. "But we will have 20% more countries and international organizations represented," Galli specified.

That physical space occupied by the various national pavilions forms an oblong new city of sorts, with lakes, ponds and huge outdoor theater. A main boulevard stretching from one end to the other was named for the ancient Roman main street, "Decumano" (Decumanus Maximus in Latin), crossed by a major thoroughfare with another Latin name, the "Cardo." Half the space is devoted to pavilions, from Italy's to those of the Vatican, Vietnam and Angola (which features a giant baobab tree). Another 35% is for park areas and ponds, while the remaining 15% forms a green ring surrounding the site, demarked by a circular transport system.

Along with the individual country pavilions, a number of nations are grouped together in nine clusters: coffee, chocolate, rice, cereals and tubers, fruits and legumes, arid zones, the sea and islands, and bio-Mediterranean. The rice cluster, for instance, features a series of rice paddies showing different varieties being grown. In previous Expo's the smaller countries had been shunted somewhat to the periphery.

Then there is the Future Food District, dedicated to the relationship between food, consumers and technology. Its goal is to explore new levels connecting food to the consumer in order to foster a sustainable alimentary chain through the introduction of innovative technologies.

Feeding the fair goers is also important, as is their entertainment. Each pavilion has a food station or restaurant, and many, including the Italian Pavilion, incorporate a play area for children.

The U.S. Pavilion, designed by architect James Biber, pays homage to the rich agricultural history of the United States. Its open design features a huge, dramatically vertical farm whose produce will be harvested daily. Why vertical? One reason is to show what can be done, another is that site space is limited. One of its slogans is that "Forget fast food – we Americans loveslow food."

In remarks before the opening of Expo, Secretary of State John Kerry spoke about the need to relate the effect of people on climate change, and its consequences for food production. "It's a cycle, and we are all part of it. Together we have the responsibility to deal with food security and climate," he said.

Expo 2015 stays open until 11 pm five nights weekly under floodlights with restaurants, events and performances like those by the Cirque du Soleil, whose 50 dancers and musicians will perform a specially created show called Allavita! – Here's to life! – from May 13 through August 30 in the Open Air Theatre. (For information and tickets to Expo and events like the Cirque du Soleil performances, see: <<< [13])

This is a sophisticated Expo, and another portal is dedicated to Gay Expo Milano [14] addressed to the lgbt community. The site offers gay-friendly information on events, hotels and what to do. (see <<< [15])

When all is said and done, what is the future of the Expo space, when most pavilions are packed away? One thought is that it be turned over to a university – but so far no final decision has been made.

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